



# Barriers and Communications Preferences of Rural Populations: A Scoping Review

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Enrollment in federal and state government programs is substantially lower for some eligible demographic subpopulations, particularly persons living in rural areas. Barriers faced when seeking program benefits information may, in part, explain such differences in enrollment. The purpose of this research is to identify barriers faced by prospective beneficiaries in rural areas and how they prefer to communicate with government agencies, and in doing so, inform Social Security Administration (SSA) disability programs processes and communication strategies.

Because there is variation in the proportion of eligible people enrolled in federal and state government programs across demographic groups — particularly among those in rural areas and those groups overrepresented in rural areas — identifying the barriers in communication with government agencies is a first step to understanding differing enrollment levels.

Conducting a scoping review of the literature using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) framework, we identified 16 relevant articles highlighting three primary themes — the impact of changes in communication approaches on program knowledge and enrollment, the significance of community context, and the barriers faced by rural communities and other underserved groups.

The findings from our study emphasize the importance of effective and diverse communication practices in improving equity in program participation among eligible individuals. Evidence suggests that public benefits programs succeed by adopting diverse, accessible, and culturally appropriate communication methods with input from local community members. This communication could include a mix of online, in-person, and printed resources to ensure equitable access

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of rural and other communities to these programs. Beyond findings associated with communication mode, the literature revealed several other recommendations, including targeting outreach efforts to promote financial literacy, ensuring online and print materials are accessible to people with disabilities and lower literacy, and reducing existing stigma surrounding public assistance program participation. Our study highlights the importance of community context in public program enrollment. For example, groups experiencing vulnerabilities such as homelessness, mental health disability, a language barrier, or those who are veterans may particularly be affected by changes to communication or the administrative burden associated with seeking program information or enrolling for the same. Tailored outreach efforts such as one-on-one support and hiring Vulnerable Population Liaisons can help improve outreach to these underserved communities.

With respect to the rural context, more limited broadband access and transportation challenges were identified

as particular barriers to program information for those residing in more remote areas of the country. Beyond these geographically specific concerns, the overrepresentation of older adults and those with disabilities in rural areas means that incorporating communication and marketing strategies that suit these demographic groups will benefit rural places.

By leveraging data-driven outreach strategies and providing information in the primary language of the targeted audience, government organizations could better educate individuals about public assistance programs. Public benefits programs play a crucial role in providing an economic safety net to millions of Americans. While marginalized populations are often the ones who benefit the most from public benefits programs, they are not easy to reach. Findings from this scoping review support additional examination and testing of targeted, custom, and universal communication methodologies for intended beneficiaries. ❖

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